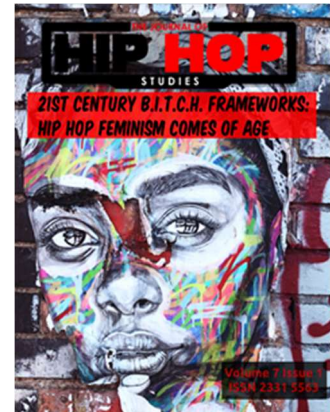


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# **“Yeah, I’m in My Bag, but I’m in His Too”: How Scamming Aesthetics Utilized by Black Women Rappers Undermine Existing Institutions of Gender**

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## **“Yeah, I’m in My Bag, but I’m in His Too”: How Scamming Aesthetics Utilized by Black Women Rappers Undermine Existing Institutions of Gender**

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*Diana Khong*

### **Abstract**

2018 was the year of the “scammer,” in which many Black women rappers took on “scamming” aesthetics in their lyrics and music video imagery. Typified by rappers such as City Girls and Cardi B, the scammer archetype is characterized by the desire for financial gain and material possessions and the emotional disregard of men. This paper investigates how Black women rappers, in employing these themes in their music, subvert existing expectations of gender by using the identity of the scammer as a restorative figure. The objectification of men in their music works in counterpoint to the dominant gender system and reasserts a new identity for women — one in absolute financial and sexual control, not only “taking” but “taking back.” Through the imagined scamming of men, Black “scammer” artists introduce new radical modes of womanhood that go beyond the male gaze. These artists profess a rhetoric of empowerment and autonomy towards the women who consume their music and in doing so reimagine power and authority in ways that leave a long-lasting cultural impact.

## Introduction

In January 2018, Jatavia Johnson was convicted of felony identity theft. Prosecutors claimed that Johnson, known more familiarly as JT of the rapper duo City Girls, had amassed a collective debt of more than one thousand dollars from illegal transactions made on stolen credit cards. After accepting a plea deal, Johnson was sentenced to twenty-four months in prison with a release date slated for March 21, 2020.<sup>1</sup>

For an up-and-coming music artist, a conviction could have nipped Johnson's career in the bud; however, it in fact did the opposite. In the midst of signing City Girls' joint record deal with Quality Control Music and Capitol Records, the revelation that Johnson was facing up to ten years in prison did not deter Quality Control's COO Kevin "Coach K" Lee from signing Johnson and Caresha "Yung Miami" Brownlee. In fact, it gave all the more reason to sign them. In an interview with *Vulture*, Brownlee comments on the record deal, saying "[Coach K] was like, 'These girls are authentic. This is real what they're rapping about. This is a story.' And they always say people love when you have a story to tell. They feel like they can relate to you."<sup>2</sup> Along with a record deal, the documentary *City Girls: Point Blank Period* was put into production, following Brownlee in the last few days before her BET performance and the beginning of her sentence.<sup>3</sup>

Sure enough, their success followed soon after. On November 16, 2018, just months after Johnson had begun serving her time in Miami's Federal Detention Center, City Girls' first studio album *GIRLCODE* dropped. Critics praised the album, calling it a collection of "how-to pointers for scheming on rich men" and "boss bitch sermon[s]."<sup>4</sup> When played on repeat, certain themes coalesce out of the music; they are, 1) men are reduced to only their wealth, and 2) in this universe, women are in control of that wealth, gaming men and leaving their pockets bare. As Johnson proclaims on "Where the Bag At," "Bad bitch, cute face, yeah you like that / Don't be surprised if I ask where the bag at."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Saponara, "City Girls Member JT Begins Serving Jail Sentence for Fraud Charges," *Billboard*, July 2, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/8463594/city-girls-jt-begins-jail-sentence-fraud>.

<sup>2</sup> Caresha Brownlee in an interview by Dee Lockett, "City Girls Are Our Greatest Scammers," *Vulture*, November 29, 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/11/city-girls-on-scamming-drake-and-jt-going-to-prison.html>.

<sup>3</sup> *City Girls: Point Blank Period*, dir. Marcus A. Clarke, Quality Control Music and Mass Appeal, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQ4oglk\\_v7M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQ4oglk_v7M).

<sup>4</sup> Natelegé Whaley, "City Girls: *G I R L C O D E*," *Pitchfork*, November 28, 2018, accessed October 22, 2019, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/city-girls-g-i-r-l-c-o-d-e/>; Wandera Hussein, "Intro (#FreeJT)," *The Fader*, November 16, 2018, <https://www.thefader.com/2018/11/16/the-best-songs-on-city-girls-girl-code-review>.

<sup>5</sup> City Girls, "Where the Bag At," *Period* (Caroline Distribution and Quality Control Music, 2018). Lyrics, "Where the Bag At by City Girls," *Genius*, 2018, <https://genius.com/City-girls-where-the-bag-at-lyrics>.

Thus, City Girls mythologize themselves, becoming Robin Hood-esque figures in this scheme-driven universe, not only taking money from men and funding their lavish lifestyle, but scaling power, privilege, and wealth. They have become “scammer” icons; Brownlee says this herself. In an interview with *Vulture*, she muses, “We be like, ‘We scammed our way into the music industry.’ We’re the biggest scammers of all time.”<sup>6</sup>

The influence City Girls has had on popular culture in the last year is undisputable. Their collection of mantras and glitzy women-led music videos resonate heavily with the newest generation of women consumers in our capitalist society. And underneath the surface, there is a very intentional act of subversion that these women put forward that is not only captivating but enduring — allowing for “wreck” and the transformation of cultural norms.<sup>7</sup> City Girls presents a narrative that is more than simply wanting to receive economic gain from their relationships with men. In *GIRLCODE*, “over the course of the mixtape’s 16 tracks, [City Girls’] focus on gaming men for personal gain starts to sound like a complicated form of women’s justice.”<sup>8</sup> They rap about “gendered, financial exploitation”; however, this time it is women on the receiving end.<sup>9</sup>

In the age of the pro-hoe and #MeToo movements, the rise of Black women rappers and Black women scammers is not coincidental. The aesthetics of scamming as utilized by artists such as City Girls and Cardi B in their music allow for feminist reimaginings of power and privilege. This reinvention of norms is disruptive, turning up the edges of the public’s conception of womanhood, and particularly Black womanhood. Thus, this performance of scamming allows for the radical reinvention of existing thought systems and women’s positionality in not only Hip Hop, but society at-large.

**“Bad bitch, cute face, yeah you like that / Don’t be surprised if I ask where the bag at.”**

— City Girls, “Where the Bag at”

*Scam* (noun)

/skam/ —

*the manipulation of a mark for economic gain, which can manifest in both long-term schemes and high-stakes short-term actions*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Brownlee in Lockett, “How City Girls Are Our Greatest Scammers”.

<sup>7</sup> Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 76.

<sup>8</sup> Niela Orr, “Miami’s City Girls are the Perfect Rappers for Scammer Season,” *BuzzFeed News*, August 10, 2018, accessed October 22, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/nielaorr/drake-city-girls-summer-scammers-period>.

<sup>9</sup> Orr, “Miami’s City Girls.”

<sup>10</sup> Eddie Kim, “Con-Culture Experts On the History and Future of Scamming,” *MEL Magazine*, <https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/con-culture-experts-on-the-history-and-future-of-scamming>.

*See Also: gendered modes of resistance*

In recent years, social media has been riddled with the iconography of well-known scam artists, hoax prophesiers, and frauds; this is seen in New York socialite Anna Delvey's (Anna Sorokin's) fall from grace, Ja Rule's failed Fyre Fest, etc. However, the social acceptability of taking on the label "scammer" was most widely sensationalized by the character of Joanne the Scammer, created by internet personality Branden Miller as he donned a blonde wig and played a transgender woman (though himself being a cis queer man). Despite being outwardly transphobic while in character as Joanne, he amassed a meteoric fanbase of upwards of 1.8 million followers.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, a generation of youth was captivated by Joanne and the act of scamming as a result. Pop culture journalist Eddie Kim imparts to us that scamming is "just the latest in a strong American tradition."<sup>12</sup> We now just see it manifest with ease (see: phishing scams, catfishing, and fraudulent products marketed through sponsored Instagram endorsements).

For artists such as City Girls, their rise to stardom is contextualized within society's current hyper fascination with scammers. Their music is a certain type of "raunchy rap" made popular by artists such as Foxy Brown and Lil' Kim, lyrics frequently outlining many scenarios where they "us[e] sex as a weapon to exploit men, [as] women making a way for themselves by attaining money and power."<sup>13</sup>

Similar aesthetics have been utilized by a slew of up-and-coming Black women rappers such as Megan Thee Stallion, Saweetie, Kash Doll, and Maliibu Miitch, all of whom come as drops in a new wave of femcees who continue to reinvent the game and disrupt oppressive gendered systems through their music.<sup>14</sup> Though Hip Hop remains a predominantly male-run genre, 2019 ushered in a myriad of new women rappers. With that comes the addition of new cultural motifs and mythos to the genre. A commonality between the above-mentioned women rappers is an adherence to financial optimization. Their lyrics offer no-nonsense narratives about their pursuit of cash and material possessions — and their consequent objectification and manipulation of financially endowed men. Maliibu Miitch raps in "Give Her Some Money," [he] "[t]ook me shoppin', I'm like, 'Eenie meenie money mo' / Now he askin' 'bout the road, bitch, I gotta go." Kash Doll muses in "Ice Me Out," "[s]ometimes I want marriage, sometimes I want karats."<sup>15</sup> Megan the Stallion delivers the line of the summer in her single "Cash Shit,"

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<sup>11</sup> Patrick D. McDermott, "Rise and Scam: Joanne the Scammer Lives for Drama: Branden Miller is Just Trying to Live," *The Fader* 105 (August/September 2016), <https://www.thefader.com/2016/08/09/joanne-the-scammer-branden-miller-messy-bitch-interview>.

<sup>12</sup> Kim, "Con-Culture Experts."

<sup>13</sup> Orr, "Miami's City Girls."

<sup>14</sup> Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, 77.

<sup>15</sup> Maliibu Miitch, "Give Her Some Money," from *If Dead Men Could Talk* (Atlantic Records, 2018); Kash Doll, "Ice Me Out," from *Stacked* (Republic Records, 2019).

where she remarks “[y]eah, I’m in my bag, but I’m in his too.”<sup>16</sup> In short, this new trend is subversive; it creates a world where men are commodified and reduced to surface traits instead of vice versa, making it antithetical to the objectification and hypersexualization of women by male rappers in their lyrics and music videos. The cultural implications of this are vast, considering the political history of Hip Hop.

**“I put my thing down, flip it, and reverse it/ Ti esrever dna ti pilf, nwod gniht ym tup.”**

— Missy Elliot, “Work It”

*wreck* (noun)

/rek/ –

*“moments when Black women’s discourses disrupt dominant masculine discourses, break into the public sphere, and in some way impact or influence the U.S. imaginary, even if that influence is fleeting”<sup>17</sup>*

Hip Hop is more than just a genre; historically, the art form has allowed for the generative changing and shaping of Black politics. Emily J. Lordi posits that Black music is “an agent of Black revolutionary thought” which can be visible in the political lyricism of artists such as Tupac Shakur.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Hip Hop, as utilized by Black women, has historically been utilized to push boundaries beyond existing racial and gender norms. Donyale Padgett, Cheryl D. Jenkins, and Dale Anderson comment that “Hip-hop’s historical roots provide an opportunity from which we can understand ... the myriad ways that [Black] women manifest resistance to oppression within and outside of their own communities.”<sup>19</sup>

Gwendolyn D. Pough remarks that Black women’s impact on Hip Hop can be understood through the concept of “bringing wreck.”<sup>20</sup> Through their music, Black women have opened up “new possibilities for the potential of Black women’s speech and action,” enacting Black feminist change in the process.<sup>21</sup> Queen Latifah implores us to “check it while I wreck it.”<sup>22</sup> By bringing “wreck,” Black woman emcees not only outshine their competition in music, but quite literally erode the “stereotypes and marginalization

<sup>16</sup> Megan thee Stallion, “Cash Shit,” from *Fever* (300 Entertainment, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, 77.

<sup>18</sup> Emily J. Lordi, *Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 18.

<sup>19</sup> Donyale R. Griffith Padgett, Cheryl D. Jenkins, and Dale Anderson, “Imag[e]ining Hip-Hop Femininity: Contentions, Contradictions, and Contributions,” in *African American Females: Addressing Challenges and Nurturing the Future*, ed. Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher and Vernon C. Polite (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 273.

<sup>20</sup> See Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, esp. 77–83.

<sup>21</sup> Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, 75.

<sup>22</sup> Queen Latifah, “Black Hand Side,” from *Black Reign* (Motown, 1993).



that inhibit their interaction in the larger public sphere."<sup>23</sup> Black women in Hip Hop engage in active acts of resistance, eating away at institutions.

LaMonda H. Stallings echoes this sentiment, by borrowing from Robin D. G. Kelley's idea of the Black Radical Imagination and putting forth the concept of the Black Ratchet Imagination, which is grounded in "un-reality and the performance of failure."<sup>24</sup> Through acts of larger-than-life performance, Black Hip Hop artists allow for the creation of transitional spaces, "engender[ing] transformative understandings of history, community, and collective possibility."<sup>25</sup>

These themes are visible in the work of artists such as Lil' Kim and Missy Elliot in furthering the empowerment of Black women by being among the first to reclaim the word "bitch."<sup>26</sup> The term, frequently used to slander women, has been taken up by women to signal endearment, commonality, and even metastasized power. As Lil' Kim raps on "Queen Bitch," "I am a diamond cluster hustler / Queen bitch, supreme bitch."<sup>27</sup> Black women consistently grapple with the weight of the white heteropatriarchy, yet still find unorthodox modes of resistance.

Now, this social power is visible in the work of new Black women emcees, many of whom are directly inspired by the overt sexuality espoused by their predecessors Foxy Brown, Lil' Kim, etc. City Girls directly shouts out Lil' Kim on "Swerve," saying "Feel like Lil Kim, swerving in a jag."<sup>28</sup> Much of their work is building upon the foundation laid by Lil' Kim, as seen in their commanding control of both their lyrics and their sexualities.<sup>29</sup> City Girls' Brownlee said herself in an interview with *Billboard*, "I like to say that we speak for women who want to say certain things, but they don't say it. ... A lot of people like to maintain classiness and carry themselves in a way, so I feel like we're an alter ego for girls."<sup>30</sup> In that way, artists such as City Girls are becoming the voice of a new generation of women against the backdrop of the #MeToo movement.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, 87.

<sup>24</sup> LaMonda H. Stallings, "Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination," *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 2, no. 2 (2013): 137, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pal.2013.0026>.

<sup>25</sup> Lordi, *Black Resonance*, 211.

<sup>26</sup> Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It*, 204.

<sup>27</sup> Lil' Kim, "Queen Bitch," from *Hard Core* (Undeas Recordings, Big Beat Records, and Atlantic Records, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> City Girls, "Swerve," from *Girl Code* (Quality Control Records, 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Trey Alston, "5 Takeaways from City Girls' 'Girl Code,'" *Revolt*, November 21, 2018, <https://www.revolt.tv/2018/11/21/20824905/5-takeaways-from-city-girls-girl-code>.

<sup>30</sup> Bianca Gracie, "City Girls, Rap's Raunchiest Newbies, on Their Plan to Outlast One Member's Prison Stint,"

*Billboard*, August 6, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/8468433/city-girls-interview-rap-raunchy-newbies>.

<sup>31</sup> Orr, "Miami's City Girls."

**“But I ain’t giving up the pussy cause the pussy is power.”**

– Cupcakke, “Sex on the First Day”

*sex (noun)*

*/seks/ –*

*intercourse*

*See Also: sells*

According to sex worker scholars Juno Mac and Molly Smith, the concept of sex positivity garnered increased attention during the early 2000s – mid-Bush administration – as “feminist bloggers became particularly invested in producing non-judgmental information about sex and sexual health, and defenses of pleasure.”<sup>32</sup> In effect, the sex positivity movement attempted and continues to attempt to abolish existing forms of sexual stigma in order to further the sexual liberation of women and gender non-conforming folk. This is mirrored in the “pro hoe” movement that has gained momentum on social media among young millennial women.<sup>33</sup> Prominent celebrities such as Amber Rose have become vocal pro-hoe icons, allowing for the normalization of sex and body positivity among a new generation of women. Furthermore, the #MeToo movement has made strides in the last three years to allow sexual assault survivors, primarily women, a forum to voice their experiences and have candid conversations on bodily autonomy. Tarana Burke, a Black community organizer, created the #MeToo movement in 2006 after years of advocacy on behalf of sexual assault and harassment survivors.

However, a clear shortcoming of all these respective movements is how the conversation falls short of extending itself towards the experiences of Black women, choosing instead to focus on the dominant narrative of womanhood centered on the needs of white women. This is exemplified by the popularization of the #MeToo hashtag by white actress Alyssa Milano without crediting Burke in the movement’s creation.<sup>34</sup>

Throughout the history of time, Black women’s sexuality has often been reduced to, as Evelyn M. Hammonds elaborates, “metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision; as a ‘void’ or empty space that is simultaneously ever-visible (exposed) and invisible, where black women’s bodies are always already colonized.”<sup>35</sup> As a result, Black women’s

<sup>32</sup> Juno Mac and Molly Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers’ Rights* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2018), 61.

<sup>33</sup> Penda N'Diaye, “‘Pro Hoe’ Is My New Definition of Sexual Freedom,” *Vice*, May 2, 2019, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/j5wmy7/pro-hoe-sex-black-women-stereotypes-kink](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/j5wmy7/pro-hoe-sex-black-women-stereotypes-kink).

<sup>34</sup> Angela Onwuachi-Willig, “What About #UsToo? The Invisibility of Race in the #MeToo Movement,” *The Yale Law Journal* 128, vol. 105, (June 18, 2018): 107.

<sup>35</sup> Evelyn M. Hammonds, “Toward A Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence,” in *Feminist Theory and the Body*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 2017), 171, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315094106-11>.



sexuality is co-opted both at the interpersonal and state level. Patricia Hill Collins imparts to us that through modes of oppression such as "employment discrimination, maintaining images of Black women that construct them as mules or objects of pleasure, and encouraging or discouraging Black women's reproduction via state intervention, Black women's labor, sexuality, and fertility all have been exploited."<sup>36</sup>

Collins further dissects this by elaborating on the racist stereotype of Jezebel, in which Black women are positioned as naturally hypersexual, and how it has been historically utilized as a tool to control the sexual visage of Black women, reinforcing their racial and sexual oppression, while also simultaneously uplifting "pure White womanhood."<sup>37</sup> However, the "Scammer" differs from "Jezebel," as it's a reclamation of sex and narrative. Given the oppression of Black women and their bodies in a capitalist society, the very act of taking corporal ownership in an overt and unapologetic way has an enduring political impact.

Such is seen in the total act of ownership that artists such as Cardi B and City Girls have put forward, staking claim over their own sexuality and representation. This self-ownership of the body is incredibly culturally significant, given the amount of state control exerted, not only over women's bodies, but Black women's bodies. In "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," Kimberlé Crenshaw writes on how the oppression of Black women is compounded by racial subjugation and gender subjugation working in tandem; thus, the intersectionality of the two become a necessary lens to view Black women's oppression through.<sup>38</sup> In the music industry, the intersecting "myths of song, race, and gender mean that to be a black female singer is to be coded as anti-intellectual," hypersexual, and commodifiable.<sup>39</sup> Rana Emerson writes that, in response to "the coexistence of hypersexual images and the denigration and denial of the beauty of the Black female body," Black women artists have reappropriated explicit Black female sexuality in the aesthetics of their own work as a means of reclamation.<sup>40</sup> It is undeniable that sex sells, but to be in the position of power in the transaction — the autonomous owner of the body — effectively alters the cultural dynamics.

Building upon the ideas of Imani Perry and Cheryl Keyes, who assert the following archetypes among female rappers: the "queen mother," "fly girl," "sista with attitude," and "lesbian," respectively, Regina N. Bradley acknowledges the existence of the Hip

<sup>36</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (2nd ed., Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 132.

<sup>37</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 132.

<sup>38</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 149.

<sup>39</sup> Lordi, *Black Resonance*, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Rana A. Emerson, "'Where My Girls At?' Negotiating Black Womanhood in Music Videos," *Gender & Society* 16, no. 1 (February 2002): 128, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243202016001007>.

Hop archetype of the “badwoman.”<sup>41</sup> Badwomen evoke rage, subverting the existing stereotype of the angry Black woman, and build out a “validated dimension” in which Black women are able to complicate the arena of Hip Hop, not just as one of mistreatment, but instead one of devictimization and rage over oppressive systems.<sup>42</sup> Thus, there is the potential for hypersexualized women to reinvent and renegotiate the terms of their personhood, especially in an industry where women are commodified, and to do so forcefully, unapologetically.<sup>43</sup> “Scammer” artists are a new manifestation of this work, overlapping with previous archetypes to fortify a new identity.

However, there are complications to reconcile with this branding, as many music artists are ultimately still entangled in strict contracts with record companies headed by music executives, who overwhelmingly are white wealthy males. As Gail Mitchell remarks, despite “[R&B/Hip Hop] edging out rock as music’s biggest genre in 2017,” there are rarely any Black people in these top executive positions that ultimately are pivotal in shaping what content gets produced in the market — and furthermore: even less Black women in these roles.<sup>44</sup> In this regard, music companies might capitalize off this particular cultural moment and push their artists into this archetype as a means of selling records, without any understanding of what the archetype brings. Thus, reductive stereotyping of young Black women can still be pervasive within the music industry and society as a whole, but in this era, it is more marketable. It is necessary to also be cognizant that despite the amount of autonomy that might be asserted by these women in their artistry, how much control they ultimately have over their work is scrutable, as seen in those artists wrestling with contract disputes.

Yet, the impact of this cultural imagery is still an enduring one, despite the entanglements of power that rest behind them. By being not only overtly sexual but presenting as women on a higher stratum of power in their imaginings of sex, Black “scammer” artists present radical modes of womanhood that push the boundaries of femhood to new polarities and shatter the male gaze. They present a narrative that effectively undermines all male power by utilizing the intentional act of seizure — of power, of privilege. The lens we are watching these artists through becomes rosy pynk<sup>45</sup> and fem-owned, at least in our imagining of them.

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<sup>41</sup> Regina N. Bradley, “Barbz and Kings: Explorations of Gender and Sexuality in Hip-Hop,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, ed. Justin A. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Keyes qtd. in Bradley, “Barbz and Kings,” 184; Bradley, “Barbz and Kings,” 188.

<sup>42</sup> Bradley, “Barbz and Kings,” 188.

<sup>43</sup> Bradley, “Barbz and Kings,” 189.

<sup>44</sup> Gail Mitchell, “Why Hasn’t the Hip-Hop Boom Pushed More Black Executives to the Top?” April 13, 2018, *Billboard*, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/8313035/hip-hop-boom-black-executives-music-business-labels>.

<sup>45</sup> Pynk refers to a single off Janelle Monáe’s critically acclaimed studio album *Dirty Computer* (Janelle Monáe, “Pynk,” from *Dirty Computer* [Bad Boy Entertainment, 2018]).

**"All a bad bitch need is the (money)"**

— Cardi B, "Money"

*scam (noun) revisited*

*/skam/ —*

*performance; reality; something in-between*

In March 2019, a three-year-old video of Belcalis "Cardi B" Almánzar resurfaced on the internet. In it, the artist talks about drugging and robbing men while struggling to make ends meet as a former sex worker. Almánzar later confirmed that the video was real, stating "I made the choices I did at the time because I had very limited options."<sup>46</sup> The public backlash was particularly vicious; some began to equivocate Almánzar's actions with the sexual assaults popular male celebrities have been accused of throughout the #MeToo movement. Some even threatened Almánzar with sexual violence and targeted her with slurs and verbal harassment — a cruel coalescence of misogyny and anti-Blackness, dubbed "misogynoir" by Moya Bailey and Trudy.<sup>47</sup>

Yet ultimately, Almánzar's reputation did not take a major hit — her 2018 studio album, *Invasion of Privacy*, soared to triple platinum status and has amassed a slew of awards, including the first Grammy for Best Rap Album won by a solo female act.<sup>48</sup> Almánzar continues to grow as one of the biggest current names in Hip Hop.

However, the entire situation opens up a necessary conversation on what it means to not only portray scamming but to actually have the lived experience of scamming as a reality grounded in struggle. In both case studies, Johnson and Almánzar illustrate the truth of what they represent in their music. In effect, scamming is not only aestheticized financial opulence but a necessary means for life for these previously working-class women. Despite the resounding amount of agency that is funneled into this idea of scamming — in tandem with social media's current trendy glorification of sex work — making it desirable, affirming, and even lucrative, in actuality, scamming can often be a matter of economic survival.

Needless to say, Johnson and Almánzar are no longer at the point where they need to scam for survival, after signing major record deals and booking sold-out tours; yet the performance of scamming continues to be visible in their music. Johnson and Almánzar's previous positionalities as women from low-income backgrounds are necessary to consider, as it elucidates what the implications of aestheticizing scamming are. For them, scamming ultimately has its roots in reality and has been used to survive; the

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<sup>46</sup> Constance Grady, "Cardi B Says She Used to Rob Men: Her Image Was Built to Withstand Scandals like This," *Vox*, March 17, 2019, <http://www.vox.com/culture/2019/3/27/18284220/cardi-b-drug-rob-controversy-scandal>.

<sup>47</sup> Moya Bailey and Trudy, "On Misogynoir: Citation, Erasure, and Plagiarism," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 763, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447395>.

<sup>48</sup> Cardi B, *Invasion of Privacy* (Atlantic Records, 2018).

performance of scamming thus mirrors the impact, though now through new imaginings of power and privilege. When performed by these artists, scamming becomes a vehicle for shifting narratives of gender, race, wealth, and space in very overt and intentional ways. In a capitalist society, aestheticizing and literally employing scams can be thought of as a means of imagining and furthering liberation whether that be sexual, financial, etc. — particularly for Black women and other women of color. Almánzar, Johnson, and other “scammer” artists have not merely romanticized materialism but have spun an entire cultural movement off of the lived experience of struggle.

### Conclusion

Megan Pete, known as the Houston rapper Megan Thee Stallion, frequently professes to her predominantly woman fanbase that women should not live for men, nor need them. She advances this message not only through her music, but through her social media presence on Twitter and Instagram. As a result, when Pete dropped her first studio album, *Fever*, on May 17, 2019, she effectively ushered in “Hot Girl Summer,” a professed cultural moment of women remaining untethered from men all in time for the season.<sup>49</sup> And while Pete has embodied the scammer in songs such as “Cash Shit,” her latest alter ego Suga, recently debuted in her eponymous 2020 EP, takes on a different rhetoric of independence.<sup>50</sup> Off that album on her single “B.I.T.C.H.,” she raps “I got my mind on gettin’ paid, we ain’t spoke in some days / He probably thinkin’ I’m in pain, but I’m really on game.”<sup>51</sup> Pete illustrates a multiplicity of states of control, not solely inhabiting the one-dimensional archetype of the “scammer” but going about professing women’s bodily autonomy through multiple different outlets. In this, Pete is preaching to a whole new generation of women who are eagerly listening and waiting to seize control of their own futures. Pete’s success comes along with Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion, the latest wave of these new Black women rappers, as well as Maliibu Miitch, Saweetie, and more in the last three years. Their come-up is situated perfectly in this particular socio-political moment as representation is demanded in media and music. The rise of these rappers results in a changing face of Hip Hop, and its subject matter, too.

On the coattails of the #MeToo, pro-hoe, and sex positivity movements, the common themes professed by many new Black women emcees are particularly salient. From Cardi to JT to their predecessor Lil’ Kim, there is a new adherence to the narrative of financial exploitation of men and the unrelenting power of women through scamming. In a young universe concocted by new femcees, women are minding their money and minding their business. In this sex-driven, materialism-driven, new dominant setting, there is no room for wasted time spent on men who do not have anything to offer. By

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<sup>49</sup> Megan Thee Stallion, *Fever* (300 Entertainment, 2019); “Hot Girl Summer,” feat. Nicki Minaj and Ty Dolla Sign (300 Entertainment, 2019).

<sup>50</sup> Megan Thee Stallion, *Suga* (1501 Certified Entertainment and 300 Entertainment, 2020).

<sup>51</sup> Megan Thee Stallion, “B.I.T.C.H.,” from *Suga*.

reducing men to their net worth — as City Girls implores us to do on their feature in Drake's "In My Feelings" — Black women emcees are subverting gender norms by taking all the control into their own hands, objectifying men as men commonly do women in both society and in Hip Hop.<sup>52</sup> This is particularly important as systemic modes of oppression continuously attempt to police Black female sexuality. Through the imagined and actualized scamming of men, gain becomes not only financial but deeply cultural, uprooting gendered and racialized limitations placed on women. Existent systems of power and privilege are being reimagined, not only in the present for these artists, but in enduring ways as they impart rhetorics of empowerment and autonomy to their predominantly female fanbases. Ultimately, the performance — and sometimes lived experience — of scamming has become a means of resistance, survival, and societal uplift, both for Black women emcees and their audiences.

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<sup>52</sup> Drake, "In My Feelings," *Scorpion* (Young Money, Cash Money, and Republic, 2018).

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